

Mali

The remains of the Ghana empire were replaced by the empire of Mali, which at its peak controlled the area of the Sudan from the Atlantic Ocean east to what is now Nigeria. *Mali* is also an Arabic word. It means “where the king lives.” Its rulers succeeded one another from 1235 to the 1450s. The origins of Mali are relayed in the story of Sundiata, the Lion King, which is the heart of the oral tradition of this part of West Africa.

Sundiata Keita

The epic begins:

Listen then sons of Mali, children of the black people, listen to my word, for I am going to tell you of Sundiata. . . . He was great among kings; he was peerless among men; he was beloved of God because he was the last of the great conquerors.

According to the epic, Mali was founded by Sundiata Keita [sun-JA-ta KAY-ta] of the Mandinka people. Sundiata was the only surviving son of a royal

family that had been slain by the ruler of the Susu, a rival group. The chief of the Susu had invaded Sundiata's homeland when he was a child. The Susu had killed Sundiata's 11 brothers, but let Sundiata live because he was only a sickly child. When Sundiata grew to manhood, he sought revenge, and, by 1235, he had vanquished the Susu and founded Mali.

Mansa Musa

The greatest of Mali's emperors was Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312 to 1332. *Mansa* means "emperor." Mansa Musa was a nephew of Sundiata and a devout Muslim convert. In addition to controlling gold mines, Mansa Musa expanded the empire to control the salt mines in the desert to the north. He established an efficient system of government for his huge empire.

In 1324, Mansa Musa undertook a 4,800-mile (7,725 km) pilgrimage to Mecca. As students should know from the section on Islam, one of the Five Pillars of Islam is to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in one's life. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage was noteworthy for the wealth that he displayed on his journey. His party is said to have included 60,000 people. Of these, 12,000 were his personal slaves. Five hundred of them carried gold staffs weighing six pounds each. Eighty of the hundreds of camels carried 300 pounds (136 kg) of gold dust each. Mansa Musa was so generous in giving away his gold that he caused a devaluation of gold in Egypt, where he stopped on his way to Mecca. In addition to fulfilling his religious duty, Mansa Musa used the pilgrimage for diplomatic and economic purposes. He created bonds with other Muslim rulers and publicized the riches and splendor of Mali.

Word of Mansa Musa's trip even reached across the Mediterranean. A map of Africa drawn in Spain in 1375, long after Mansa Musa's death, for the first time showed Mali—represented by an emperor on a throne with a golden scepter.

Timbuktu

One of the beneficiaries of Mansa Musa's efforts to advertise Mali was the trading city of Timbuktu on the Niger River. Mansa Musa brought back the Muslim architect es-Saheli from Granada, in Spain, to design mosques and palaces in Timbuktu. Es-Saheli's most lasting accomplishment, however, was the use of burnt-brick in construction. This became standard building material in West Africa.

Muslim scholars followed the trade routes to Timbuktu, and the city became a leading center of Muslim intellectual development, attracting students and scholars of law and Islam from across North Africa and the Middle East. A great university grew up in the Sankore district of the city, training scholars, doctors, judges, and clerics who took their knowledge to other cities. By the 1500s, when the writer Leo Africanus (Hassan ibn Muhammad) visited Timbuktu, the city had 150 schools teaching the Qur'an. Although the empire of Mali disappeared, Timbuktu continued to thrive as part of the empire of Songhai.

Ibn Batuta

Ibn Batuta [IHB-uhn bat-TOO-tah] (also spelled Ibn Batutta or Ibn Battutah) was an Arab born in what is today Morocco. One day he left home to see the world. In 30 years Ibn Batuta visited every Muslim land as well as many parts of the world beyond. In addition to Africa and the kingdoms of the Middle East, he

What Teachers Need to Know

Background

Note: The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions are also printed on the reverse side of the *Art Resources* and have been written with students in mind so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

It is essential that students understand that the African art in this section comes from the past. Today, many people in African countries live in large, populated cities, working as lawyers, bankers, teachers, and so forth. Children attend school, wear modern clothing, play sports, and go to the movies. There are stores, restaurants, and businesses. In rural areas, people often participate in agricultural lifestyles. While living in contemporary society, some African peoples simultaneously link to their past through the continuation of traditions and beliefs, many of which are associated with the types of objects discussed in this section.

Africa is a patchwork of societies, each with its own distinct religions, belief systems, culture, and history. African art varies depending upon the intentions of the creator and the community from which it came, each of which generally has its own aesthetic and artistic models.

Traditionally, Africans didn't make a definitive distinction between art and life. In most of the 1,000 or so languages still spoken in Africa, there is no historic word for art, at least in the western European sense of an object to be admired solely for aesthetic purposes.

Not Just Decoration: Context and Function

Where do we see art on a daily basis? In Western societies, art is primarily relegated to museums, galleries, or public spaces. By and large, artworks are isolated from the events of our daily lives. They inhabit separate, rarified places that we visit when we wish to contemplate their beauty.

African art was admired for its beauty. But African artworks also had many practical and traditional purposes: honoring the dead, royalty, or other important individuals; appeasing the spirits in the hopes of ensuring fertility, health, or successful endeavors; conquering one's enemies; and signifying authority, power, and prestige. Art in other cultures (Rome, Greece, and Native American cultures) had similar purposes.

Art was an intimate part of communal life. It was used in ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and celebrations. Often, only certain people had access to particular objects. For instance, only royal personages, chiefs, or esteemed individuals within

the community could commission and use carved staffs, thrones, or elaborately beaded crowns. Masks and other items related to secret societies were typically limited to initiates, who cared for the items and stored them in special places out of the public eye when not in use.

Art also communicated social information about particular individuals. For example, in the South African Ndebele [un-deh-BELL-ay] tribe, females wore certain beaded garments as young girls; different ones at puberty; and still another set of garments after marriage, giving birth, and a son's initiation. (See the included reproduction, discussion, and Looking Questions for the Apron [*jocolo*] on pp. 274–275.) Anyone within the community would have immediately “read” this information from the woman's splendid garments, which she wore on special occasions. Items such as engagement and wedding rings serve similar purposes in mainstream Western society today.

Artworks, Materials, and Artists

Possibly you are already familiar with African masks (and headdresses), but artists also fashioned thrones, staffs, buildings, granary doors, interiors, furnishings, palace compounds, grave markers, pottery, weavings, ancestral and reliquary figures, oracle and divination items, fetishes (natural objects believed to have supernatural powers), textiles, musical instruments, and objects of adornment. As noted above, art and life were intimately interwoven.

Wood and metal are some of the most common materials used to create African art. (See the carved wooden face mask and the cast bronze head of a queen mother.) Artists also used clay, cloth, pigments (painted on mud walls and human bodies), shells, skin, ivory, horns, feathers, and bone as additional materials.

Artists in some African societies learned through apprenticeship. Often they learned the artistic skills as well as the associated prayers and/or rituals required to create pieces that held special powers. In other instances, people believed artists might receive instruction and/or guidance through dreams and visions. Many artists planned and designed their objects. Making something beautiful was important not just for the eye, but because people believed that the “better” the object, the more successful the results of the event associated with the object. A better artwork would be more effective at influencing the gods or the weather, for example.

Evolving Traditions

Starting in the early 20th century, traditional African art had an enormous impact on modern European art. For instance, Pablo Picasso admired and collected African art and incorporated some formal elements of it into his work.

Artists in Africa today may continue age-old traditions, while others may work in contemporary media and styles—making little or no reference at all to historical works. From the earliest of times, African cultures borrowed from one another. Later European contact had an impact on African art as well. For instance, bright, colorful Portuguese glass beads brought by traders replaced indigenous shell, ivory, wood, and bone beads. The included reproduction of the Apron (*jocolo*) demonstrates how European goods were integrated to create a uniquely African expression.

Whether historical or modern, African art serves a variety of purposes and reflects the many aesthetics of the vastly different cultures from which it comes.

Head of a Queen Mother (16th century)

Artists in Benin, West Africa, typically made cast bronze or brass heads of royal personages. These were generally lifelike but also somewhat idealized. Whether representing *obas* (kings) or others in the royal family, the portraits were meant to convey the glory and power of the court. The artists who made them worked for the king and were highly esteemed. Before casting the heads, the artists said prayers and made special sacrifices to the gods.

This bronze sculpture demonstrates the importance of the queen mother as the official “head” of the government. Women past childbearing age were thought to be at the height of their power. The queen mother’s face here is perfectly smooth and her gaze is slightly abstracted. The pointed cone on her head recalls a rooster’s comb, which compares her power to that of a strong male. The netted design represents woven reddish-pink coral beads, exchanged with Portuguese traders, which symbolize wealth. The bronze itself denoted wealth, and was owned by the *oba*.

The rings around the woman’s neck represent both status and beauty. Long necks were highly regarded in West Africa, and women often wore rings around their neck in order to enhance their beauty. These rings were also viewed as a symbol of wealth and status.

Looking questions

Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- **Look carefully at this face. Where do you think it comes from, and who might this person be?** *It is a sculpture from Africa of an unknown queen.*
- **How can you tell from the reproduction that this head is made from a hard material?** *The reflection of light on the surface of the head and its hard edges show that it is made from a hard material.*
- **Can you tell what the sculpture is made from?** *Answers will vary. It’s made of bronze.*
- **Bronze is a metal that can be cast in a mold. Does anyone know how this process works?** *Bronze casting is the process of making a form by pouring molten bronze into a mold made of hardened sand or clay.*
- **Do you think this is exactly what the woman looked like in real life? Why or why not?** *Answers will vary.*
- **What details help you understand that this was an important woman in her society?** *The decorative headpiece, forehead markings (scarification), and neck ornament show that the subject of this work was an important woman in her society.*

African Bamana Headdress

The Bamana [BAH-mah-nah] people of west central Mali live on dry savanna land with poor soil. It is a struggle to produce prosperous crops. The Bamana believe that in the distant past they were taught how to become strong, skilled farmers by a mythical creature called Chi-Wara, sometimes also spelled Tyi Wara (“work animal”). Specifically, he taught them how to grow corn from millet.

The antelope headdress evolved from the Bamana belief that the antelope best embodied the grace and strength needed by farmers. The headdresses were worn on top of the head during planting ceremonies. There were male and female versions, representing the important role that both men and women play in a successful harvest. The male headdress included the rays of the sun, and the female headdress represented Earth. Raffia on the masks served as a reminder of the importance of rain. The headdress ceremony represented the need for cooperation and balance.

The young men and women who wore the headdresses would have danced to drums and bent low to the ground in imitation of the action of hoeing the soil. Their bodies were covered with strands of dried grass to recall the falling rain. Frequently, a hoeing contest would be a part of the ceremony, and the actions of the headdress wearers would serve as encouragement to the contestants.

Looking questions

Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- **What animal is depicted here? Answers will vary. Explain that it is an antelope with horns.**
- **What kind of artwork would you say this is? Students may say it is a sculpture (which it is). Tell them that this is a headdress, a decorative item to be worn on the head during ceremonies and dances. The basket at the bottom sits on the top of the head.**
- **How would you feel if you had to dance while wearing this headdress? Students may say proud, embarrassed, or afraid it might tip over and fall off.**
- **Why do you think the Bamana people wore these headdresses? Answers will vary. The headdress seems to have been a part of ceremonies connected with farming and planting.**
- **Which features of the antelope are especially prominent in the headdress? The horns are especially prominent.**

Portrait Head of an Ife King (12th–14th century)

The ancient city of Ife [EE-fay] was located in present-day southwestern Nigeria. It was (and still is) the sacred city of the Yoruba [your-OO-ba] people. A remarkable sculpting tradition flourished there from the 12th to the 14th century. A number of examples of Ife portrait heads survive. Some are made of terra-cotta; others are made of metal.

The delicacy of the detail and the great naturalism found in the heads lead scholars to believe that the ancient Ife artists were among the greatest of their time. Some scholars suggest that perhaps the sculptors of the terra-cotta pieces were female because in Yoruba society, women are traditionally the ones who work with clay.

The elaborate headdress, or crown, found on this head makes it unique. It consists of an intricate network of beads and appears to have a cloth beneath it. It is thought to be a portrait of an *oni* (king), or a god in the guise of an *oni*. The striations on the face represent scarification, or ornamental marks, scars, or scratches made on the human body.

Looking questions

- **What clues does the artist provide to help you know that this was an important person in Yoruba culture?** *The elaborate headdress; strong, dignified face; and classic beauty show that the subject was an important person in Yoruba culture.*
- **It is believed that the head was once attached to a body. What do you imagine the body may have looked like?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Heads and figures such as this one may have been buried in the ground near large trees and dug up when needed for a ceremony. Why might the Yoruba have buried these heads until they were needed?** *Answers will vary. Some comments should touch on how their rare appearance would lend to their power and importance.*
- **If you were to bury one of your most valued objects and look at it only once a year, how would your view of it change?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Point out to students the sweep of the lines down the face. What, if anything, do they add?** *Answers will vary. Some students may say that the lines add to the gracefulness of the face and make it more lifelike. By contrast, the eyes and lips are smooth.*

Belt mask of Queen Idia (c. 1517–1550)

Benin was an important city-state established in what is now modern-day southwestern Nigeria. Benin was ruled by an *oba*, or king, and flourished from the late 12th century through the 19th century.

The ceremonies of the royal court of Benin must have been beautiful spectacles. Royalty would appear bedecked with ornaments such as this ivory belt mask. It was one of several items that might be worn around the neck or at the hip by an *oba*. The belt mask would have been made by a highly skilled artist of the royal court. In this case, the artist used ivory from the tusk of an elephant, an important African trade good.

Although the features are idealized, one has the sense that this is a portrait of a royal Benin woman. The two longer scarification marks and the pupils would have had iron inlays. The carver relied on line to bring a complexity to the design. From the intertwined decoration of the head and neckwear, to the loops, to the various facial features, line plays a crucial role in defining and detailing the form.

Looking questions

Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- **What do you see? Where do you think this piece of artwork comes from?** *It is a mask. It is an African mask.*
- **How did the artist vary the texture of the ivory?** *The smooth surface of the face, the etched lines of the loops, and the pattern of the head and neckwear are examples of the way that the artist varied the texture of the ivory.*
- **From what animal does ivory come? Why, centuries ago, would ivory have been considered a rare material?** *Ivory comes from elephants. Because elephants are dangerous and difficult animals to hunt, ivory would have been considered a rare material.*
- **If you had to guess what sort of person the mask shows, what would you say?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Compare the Head of a Queen Mother with the mask. What similarities do you see? How are they different?** *Answers will vary.*